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Social Workers Affecting Social Policy, an international perspective

JOHN GAL AND IDIT WEISS-GAL (Eds)

Bristol, UK, Policy Press, 2014

215pp

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£24.99

Gal and Weiss-Gal's edited text on policy practice is a timely contribution to what is an under-researched and under-practised area of social work. Policy practice is defined as 'activities, undertaken by social workers as an integral part of ... practice, that focus on the formulation and implementation of new policies, as well as on existing policies and suggested changes to them' (Weiss-Gal and Gal, 2011:12, cited on pp.4-5). Whilst international variations of this definition emerge throughout the text, all coalesce around social work being a vehicle for social change. That is a profession that conceives of social problems through a lens of social justice at a structural level and, fundamentally, is pro-active in responding to unmet service users' needs at a policy level.

The unique contribution of this edited collection is that it brings together a diverse international perspective on policy practice from Australia, England, Israel, Italy, Russia, Spain, Sweden and the US. The book is structured around an introduction and conclusion and eight country based chapters. The introduction contextualises the concept of policy practice along with an overview of the text. The conclusion summarises policy practice across the eight countries, with good coverage of the international commonalities and differences. Each country based chapter explores four questions:

1. Social Work Discourse – what is the importance of policy practice in Codes of Ethics, formal social work documents and professional literature?
2. Social Work Education – what is the role of policy practice in social work education and how is it taught?
3. Social Work Practice – how do social workers engage in policy practice?
4. Social Worker Involvement in Policy Practice – what are the factors that contribute or inhibit involvement in policy practice?

What emerges from this comparative study is that there are significant international variations, with pockets of good practice but overall very limited policy practice. In relation to social work education Australia, Israel, Spain and the US are cited as offering applied policy practice courses alongside social policy teaching. However, no single country is highlighted as providing extensive teaching of policy practice, with none offered in Italy. When considering the place of policy practice in Codes of Ethics, Australia, England and the US were found to have the most explicit references. Israel is leading the other countries in terms of academic output on the topic (as exemplified by this book), in contrast the Russian authors noted that no literature is being produced in Russia on policy practice.

The socio-political context and the social work profession emerged as salient factors influencing the involvement of social workers in policy practice. For example, the continuing impact of the Franco and communist eras in Spain and Russia, respectively, were explored along with how each country is only slowly understanding and redefining the scope for questioning and critiquing government policy. The influence of a discourse of neo-liberalism was highlighted as a more a current and prevalent factor across the countries that is impacting on social policy, social work and social change.

The tensions between structural, macro-level approaches to social work and individual, micro-level approaches are threaded throughout the text and connect directly with the influence that the social work profession has on policy practice. How these tensions manifest themselves varied internationally. The authors of the chapters on Australia, Israel, Italy, Sweden and the US point to individualisation and the use of clinical psychotherapy interventions to explain low involvement in policy practice. In contrast, in England, an individualistic approach centred on choice and personalisation has come to the fore. Whilst this individualistic approach is conceived of very differently to the clinical practice evident elsewhere, both approaches focus the lens of the social worker at the individual and not at the structural level, thereby diminishing scope for policy practice.

The focus of this book is on policy practice, yet it offers the reader much more in terms of a comparative insight into social work education and practice in eight liberal democracies. In doing so the text engages in key questions about the profession. It problematizes what social workers do and should do, the context of social work education and its role in preparing a workforce to seek change in policy that curtails the lives of service users. Whilst reference to service users is a constant in the book, the focus is on social workers finding a voice and using it to articulate injustice. A weakness of the text is that the service user voice is not promoted nor are suggestions discussed for integrating their voices into policy practice. This should not, however, distract from an edited collection that will be valuable reading for social work students, academics and practitioners and create a foundation for discussion on the future of a profession that can engage more fully in policy practice as an area of social work activity and pro-actively work towards social change in everyday practice.

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